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AUTHOR Feagans, Heather
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ABSTRACT

A second-grade teacher wanted to enable her students to look at several pieces of their own writing, pick the best piece, and write an explanation as to why it was chosen. She began by developing a series of probing questions that the students could ask themselves as they evaluated their own writing. So that students could fully understand the questions and use them effectively for their evaluations, the teacher modeled the procedure in the classroom. After three weeks in which students orally evaluated books they were reading and their own journal writing, they attempted written evaluations. Students were encouraged to add more detail to their evaluations to prevent them from becoming stilted, and shared their journal entries in pairs to have a real audience for their writing. Two students' journal entries demonstrate growth in the evaluation of their own writing. Students acquired a better understanding of the concepts of main idea and detail. Students were also able to identify different types of writing, such as riddles, information pieces, stories, songs, personal pieces, movie reviews, book reviews, and tongue twisters. Providing a series of questions created a scaffold which proved to be effective in guiding students to evaluate their own writing. Students' reflections on the questions led to the new ability of elaboration which transferred to other writing in the classroom. (RS)

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USING STRUCTURED QUESTIONS TO IMPROVE WRITING SELF EVALUATION

Heather Feagans

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Using Structured Questions to Improve Writing Self Evaluation

by Heather Feagans
Spring ISD

Can second grade students evaluate their own writing and make appropriate selections for their portfolios? This was the question that guided my research with my second grade class. My class consisted of 16 students working on grade and 6 students working below grade. My goal was to enable them to look at several pieces of their own writing, pick the best piece, and write an explanation as to why it was chosen. When students are able to evaluate their own work, it helps them reflect on and understand their own strengths and needs, and encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning (Valencia, 1990).

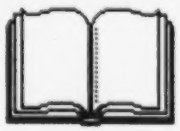
Initially, I had to find out exactly where they were in the evaluation process. I asked several students to look through their journals and find their best piece of writing. Next, I asked each student why he or she chose the piece they did. Responses included blank stares, shrugging shoulders, and "because I like it." In order to pull a response from students, I found myself probing by asking a series of questions. I discovered that if asked a specific question about their writing, they were able to answer me. I decided that if they had a list of questions to ask themselves as they were reading over their writing, they would be able to evaluate their own writing. The questions I developed follow:

1. Is it important to you?
2. Does it make sense to you?
3. Does it make you think of something in your own life?
4. Does it create a picture in your mind?
5. Does it make you laugh?
6. Does it make you cry?
7. Does it help you learn something new?
8. Do you like the way it sounds?

These questions act as a type of scaffold, because they provide a series of platforms for performing self evaluation of writing (Lipson and Wixson, 1991).

In order for students to fully understand the questions and use them effectively for their evaluations, I knew I needed to model the procedure in the classroom. Modeling took the form of thinking aloud for students by answering each question for a variety of reading selections in the classroom. The students and I soon discovered that the answer to questions one and two should always be "yes." They realized that when evaluating a selection, they could answer more then one of the questions. When modeling the evaluations, I suggested to the students that it would be helpful to connect the answers to the questions with the text. For example, when answering question three, I would ask myself the following question: What part of the story reminded me of what person or event in my own life?

After modeling the questioning process, I began to let students orally evaluate books they were reading during DEAR time. I put all the students' names into a library book pocket and chose two students a day to give a book evaluation. I told students that when they evaluated their book, we would assume that the answer to questions one and two were "yes." I gave students a very specific form for their book evaluations. They would state the title and author of the book. Then, they would briefly tell the main idea of the book. Finally, they would evaluate the book, answering one or more of questions three through eight.



During this time, I was also allowing students to orally evaluate their own journal writing after sharing their journal entry with the class. Their oral journal evaluation was very similar to the book evaluation. They stated the type of writing, what it was about (the main idea), why they wrote the entry; and finally they evaluated it by answering one or more of questions three through eight. I expected students to complete their oral evaluations in complete sentences to make the transfer from oral to written expression smoother.

After three weeks of orally evaluating books and journal entries, I decided to have students attempt a written evaluation. I told students to read through their entries for the week. I also told them to let the questions guide them as they were making their selection. They answered the following questions about their selected entry on paper.

1. What type of writing is it?
2. What is it about? (main idea)
3. Why did you write it?
4. Why did you choose it? (Use questions three through eight to help)

After several weeks of having students write evaluations of their journal entries for portfolio placement, I still had concerns. One

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concern was that their answers to questions three through eight sounded formulaic, as if they were just filling in a blank.

To prevent students' answers from being stilted, and to help them reflect more on their writing, I encouraged them to add more detail to their evaluations. I used two procedures to help them accomplish this objective. First, I went through each question and explained how details could be added. For example, I told students that when they answered question four, they needed to describe what they saw. If they saw a dog, then they needed to describe what the dog looked like. Second, I took evaluations that needed elaboration or extension and as a class we added details to them. After providing class practice and constant reminders, I started to see greater elaboration in their evaluations.

Another concern was they did not appear to be reading each week's four journal entries before making a selection. To encourage them to read each piece before choosing one, I let them pick partners and share their journal entries. Giving them an audience by providing partners encouraged them to read before making a selection. Taken together, these procedures seemed to have a positive impact on students' evaluations. They appeared to be more likely to reflect on their writing, and displayed an increased tendency to support their evaluations with details.

Recorded below are examples of the progression of evaluations of journal entries of two children. Comments on each child's growth follow each set of examples. These evaluations were selected to represent the range of ability levels in the class and to illustrate the nature of the improved evaluations.

Marie's Work

Entry 1

The Girl That Liked Bears

One day there was a girl named Amy and she loved to play with bears and she said, "momy I want a bear" said Amy. "O.K." said mom, "now run along and play supper is almost ready" "O.K. mom" said Amy. "Tommorrow is Amy's birthday I now what I am going to get her a bear." Amy is happy now.

Evaluation 1

I wrote a story on bears. The name of my story is The Girl That Liked Bears. I wrote the story because I like bears alot. I chose this story because the part were Amy got a bear created a picture.

Entry 2

Money

Money is something you can spend you can also play pocker. The color's of money are gold, silver, and green. You can add money to make a sertent amount. You can subtract to make you poor.

Evaluation 2

I wrote an information piece about money. I wrote is because I like money. I chose it because the part where you add to make a sertent amount of money makes me think of my own life when I go to the store.

Entry 3

Hellen Keller

Hellen Keller was a blind and defe person. She has a teacher named Anne. Anne was Hellen's first teacher. Anne ment alot to her. Hellen and Anne where famas. They went around the world. Anne was very eil. Anne died Hellen was very sad.

Evaluation 3

I wrote an information piece on Hellen Keller. I wrote it because I like Hellen Keller very much. The part where Anne died makes me think of when my Nanny died. I was 7 years old she died in March. She was 86 1/2 years old.

Orally she told me her Nanny meant a lot to her just like Anne meant a lot to Helen. Marie's last evaluation taught me another concept that I could work on with my students, the power of comparison. Although she didn't write the comparison of Anne to her Nanny, she did think of it. I had asked them to tell me what part of their piece reminded them of something in their own life, but I never used the word compare. They may have understood more if I had told them to compare an event in their writing to an event in their own life or compare a character in their writing to someone they know. Marie's evaluations suggest that she has learned to add details.

Damone'sWork

Entry 1

Ducks

Ducks are cool. They are as nice as rice. They are folee (feathery) like a bird. They lay eggs like a hen.

Evaluation 1

I wrote a poem about ducks. I wrote it because I like ducks. I chose it because it creates a picture in my mind of when I went to a pond and saw some ducks.

Entry 2

Basball is the one. the bese (best) of thim all noting bater then basball. Noting is bater soctt (soccer), football, or haucy (hockey) those are boring. That is wuy (why) basball is the best.

Evaluation 2

I wrote a pome on Basball. I wrote is because I like basball. I chose it because it cerates a picture in my mind of when my ucol hit it in to the dich. it whent thit (thud)

Entry 3

We love the war.
A gun is the best thing to use in the war.
Right on time.

Evaluation 3

I wrote a pome about war. I wrote it because I like war. I chose it because it creat a picture in my mind of three men diaing. One man is falling off the staer onto six boto. (bottles) Another man got stab in the hrart and the last man got chope in haf by the fan.

Damone explained to me that his poem was about a war in a bar. It was encouraging that he was able to

describe something in his evaluation that was not written in the poem. He was able to visualize his own work. Damone's third evaluation shows that he has learned how to describe what he sees in his mind rather then just stating it.

I think there were many benefits of this project for the students. Some results I expected, and others I did not. As expected, having a set of structured questions helped students to think about and reflect on both their reading and their writing. Students were able to select pieces and supply reasons for those selections. Unexpectedly, students acquired a better understanding of the concepts of main idea and detail. Now when I do process writing in my classroom and I ask students to add detail to a story, they understand what I am talking about.

The children are also able to identify different types of writing. In my room I keep a list of the different kinds of entries students can write in their journals. When we do a new type of writing or a student comes up with an idea, we add it to the list. I think that encourages students to experiment with different kinds of writing. At the end of this year, our list included:

1. Riddles
2. Information pieces
3. Poems
4. Stories (narrative)
5. Songs
6. Personal pieces
7. Comparison paper
8. Descriptive paper
9. How To
10. Movie review
11. Book review
12. T.V. show review
13. Tongue twisters
14. Advertisements

I would predict that the question or questions answered vary with the type of writing. For example, in my research students were choosing writing from their journals which were self motivated first drafts. As I expected, the question answered most often was, "Did it make you think of something in your own life?" "Did it create a picture in your mind?" was the next most answered question followed by "Did you like the way it sounds?" and "Did it make you laugh?"

I think if the writing type changed, the questions answered would also change. For example, if students were evaluating poems, I think it would be likely that some students would answer the question "Do you like the way it sounds?" In contrast, if students were evaluating research papers, some students would probably answer the question "Did you learn something new?" My next question is: "Can students use the list of structured questions to write for a specific purpose?" For example, can students look at question number five and write something that will make people laugh?

Providing a series of questions created a scaffold which proved to be effective in guiding students to evaluate their own writing. The evaluations included justifications for their best selections. The questions also helped students to become better writers. Their reflections on the questions led to the new ability of elaboration which transferred to other writing in the classroom.

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(Pseudonyms have been used for the students.)